

Navy Wings

HELPED BRING VICTORY IN EUROPE

By Cmdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

The story of U.S. Naval Aviation in the Pacific during World War II is very well known, but perhaps less known is the story of naval aircraft and crews that served with distinction in Europe against Germany and its Axis allies. This article will look at actions and campaigns that ranged from northwest Africa to the cold, damp airfields of England and beyond.

OPERATION TORCH



In the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his military advisers began planning offensive operations in both the Pacific and Europe. The offensive in the Solomon Islands, beginning in August 1942, began the long trek to Japan. The Allies, however, decided to focus the majority of their resources to take care of Germany first. It was out of this “Europe first” policy that the first action involving U.S. Naval Aviation forces in Europe was executed against the Vichy French territories of French Morocco and Algeria in North Africa in November 1942.

The Americans and British wanted to land in Africa to strike German and Italian forces in Libya from behind and prepare for the invasion of Italy. The French remained angry that the British had attacked the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir in July 1940 and at Dakar two months later. As a result, there was concern that the Vichy forces would fight, if only as a point of honor. What made the matter even more awkward was the fact that France had bought several fighters and light bombers from the United States

just before the war. The Curtiss and Martin aircraft were used against the Germans in 1940, and in 1942 the puppet Vichy government continued to operate these aircraft, which were painted with conspicuous red-and-yellow stripes on the engine cowlings and tail surfaces. Overall, the Allies faced approximately 500 French aircraft of varying numbers and quality.

The assembled Allied task force included nine American and British carriers: USS *Ranger* (CV 4), USS *Sangamon* (CVE 26), USS *Chenango* (CVE 28), USS *Swansee* (CVE 27), USS *Santee* (CVE 29), HMS *Avenger*, HMS *Argus*, HMS *Furious*, and HMS *Dasher*.

As the first troops hit the beach on 8 November 1942, the carriers launched strikes against targets and met some resistance, mainly light antiaircraft fire from shore-based batteries. The French battleship *Jean Bart*, bottled up in Casablanca harbor, added its 15-inch guns to the mix of enemy





An F4F Wildcat launches from USS Ranger (CV 4) off the coast of French Morocco on 8 November 1942. Note the two L-4 Grasshoppers in flight above the Wildcat.



Vichy French air units that greeted Allied forces in November 1942 included American-built Curtiss Hawk 75s, such as these with Groupe de Chasse 1/5. The Hawk was the export version of the P-36. (Photo from Musee de l'Air et de l'Espace)

fire until a response from the USS *Massachusetts* (BB 59) struck the French ship's one working turret. Several Vichy destroyers and submarines sortied from the harbor as F4F Wildcats and SBD Dauntlesses from *Ranger* and the U.S. escort carriers bombed and strafed targets.

The first major aerial resistance appeared in the form of American-built Curtiss Hawk 75s, the export version of the U.S. Army's P-36. Although the French aviators were reluctant to fight their erstwhile American allies, they did, shooting down four Wildcats while losing 16 of their own.

Even a lumbering SOC biplane, usually used for artillery spotting, got into the action by bombing a tank column with depth charges.

Another oddly placed little Army plane also participated in the fight. An L-4 Grasshopper, the Army's version of the Piper Cub, launched from *Ranger* to offer spotting services. The little Grasshoppers were in the thick of it, and some of them were struck by enemy fire. Added to this mix were a number of P-40s that launched from the escort carrier *Chenango*. A few Americans were shot down and captured, although their internment proved to be brief. While the fighters were engaged, squadrons of SBDs and TBF Avenger torpedo bombers attacked various targets, including *Jean Bart*, now badly damaged at her berth.

Overwhelmed, French resistance collapsed on 10 November. An armistice was signed on 11 November, the day on which a similar action brought World War I to a close 24 years earlier. Operation Torch served several purposes, not the least of which was the beginning of the expulsion of German and Italian forces from North Africa. It also provided valuable experience for further Allied operations that would eventually lead to the landing in France on 6 June 1944.



*During the landings at Casablanca, aircraft from *Ranger* and U.S. escort carriers hit the battleship *Jean Bart*. The French ship would later be repaired and serve until 1961.*



A SCANDINAVIAN DIVERSION

Ranger returned to the United States and spent several months on anti-submarine (ASW) and maritime patrol. Eventually, the carrier and its air group were sent back across the Atlantic to help with Operation Leader, the Royal Navy's plan to attack German targets at Bodø on Norway's west central coast, just above the Arctic Circle, on the Norwegian Sea.

In August 1943, *Ranger* reached the main Royal Navy base at Scapa Flow and began training flights so the aircrews could get the feel of their new theater of operations. There were occasional mishaps involving the loss of aircraft, but soon *Ranger* joined the main Royal Navy task force as it headed for Bodø. Targets included enemy shipping along the rocky Norwegian coast, oil tanks, the aerodrome at Bodø, and radar facilities near the city itself. *Ranger* launched its first aircraft shortly after 0600 on 4 October, an ASW patrol of two SBDs and four F4Fs as a combat air patrol. Other sorties followed, including by TBF Avengers carrying bombs instead of torpedoes in their internal bays.

The first target of opportunity turned out to be a German cargo ship. A section of Wildcats peeled off to strafe the little steamer, encountering a surprisingly stout defense of anti-aircraft fire, which struck one of the U.S. fighters. Although his cockpit was filled with smoke, the pilot, Lt. Cmdr. Charles Moore Jr., took his Wildcat down to masthead height and made several runs strafing the German ship's deck, leaving it so badly damaged that the SBD pilots who followed decided to save their ordnance for another target. Another was quickly found.

The Dauntlesses attacked a small convoy of ships, and the accompanying Wildcats made another strafing run. Bombs struck a cargo vessel but flak rose from the burning ship, hitting the American attackers with some success. The ship showed signs of serious damage, but still offered surprisingly dangerous resistance. Several Wildcats and Dauntlesses sustained hits. Attacks on other ships met with similar enemy fire.

Seven ships were eventually sunk by the two morning strikes, and later in the day air-to-air encounters saw two German aircraft—a Ju 88 attack bomber and an He 115 floatplane bomber—shot down by Wildcats. They were the first German kills of the war by the U.S. Navy. The Ju 88 had been on a snooper mission, and the big Heinkel floatplane had probably been caught in a rain squall and had the bad luck to run into an American patrol of seven young fighter pilots aching for a fight. They disposed of the He 115 only 13 miles from *Ranger*. One of the pilots, Lt. j.g. Dean "Diz" Laird, would eventually go to the Pacific and score five kills against the Japanese. He became the only U.S. Navy ace to claim kills against the two main Axis powers.



*Among the German aircraft shot down during Operation Leader in 1943 by Navy pilots from *Ranger* was a Heinkel He 115, a floatplane that had been a deadly adversary to the Arctic convoys bringing supplies to Soviet ports.
(Photo from EN Archive Collection)*



Prior to the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, 17 U.S. Navy pilots from various OS2U and SOC units from Navy cruisers and battleships in the European theater formed Cruiser Scouting Squadron (VCS) 7, which flew Spitfire VBs. In less than a month of combat after 6 June against German shore defenses, the short-lived squadron lost nine Spitfires while flying 209 sorties. Here, Lt. Francis Cayhill, originally from USS Augusta (CA 31), gets ready for a sortie with the help of Sailor John F. Mulreany. (Photo from National Archives)

THE INVASION OF SOUTHERN FRANCE

The landings of 6 June 1944 were intended to gain an Allied foothold in northern France and to forge a path to the population and political centers of Germany. To protect the flank of this advance, landings were planned for the south of France as well. Initially named Operation Anvil (later changed to Dragoon—according to rumors at the time—because British Prime Minister Winston Churchill claimed he had been “dragooned” into participating) the U.S.-led invasion began on 15 August 1944, with two task forces combining British and American ships, including seven British CVEs and two U.S. CVEs (USS *Tulagi* [CVE 72] and USS *Kasaan Bay* [CVE 69]). These small

but extremely useful flattops together carried 216 fighters, mainly Grumman F6F Hellcats and Supermarine Seafires.

The landings went off without much trouble, unlike the bloody operations at Normandy more than two months earlier. And it was not until 19 August that German aircraft put in an appearance. *Tulagi*’s squadron was Observation-Fighter Squadron (VOF) 1. This oddly named squadron’s mission was spotting for naval gunfire. At first equipped with F4U-1 Corsairs, the unit exchanged its “U-birds” for F6F-3s, then F6F-5s.

During Dragoon, VOF-1 flew hundreds of reconnaissance and interdiction sorties against German rolling stock and

also called in strikes for U.S. Army troops. Of the eight German aircraft shot down in aerial combat, VOF-1 aviators accounted for six, losing five Hellcats in the process. Ens. Ed Olszewski scored two kills—two Ju 52 transports—on 21 August. That same day, two He 111 bombers were spotted and the VOF-1 Hellcats gave chase. The Germans split up, heading in two different directions. Lieutenants Rene E. Poucel and Archie R. Wood went after one of the Heinkels, eventually shooting it down. Lt. Cmdr. John H. Sandor and Ens. David E. Robinson went after the southbound bomber, eventually shooting it down as well. A third bomber was soon spotted and Wood gave chase, pumping .50-caliber bullets into the German aircraft until it, too, crashed. The four VOF-1 fighters were not finished, however. On the way back to their ship, they strafed an airfield (damaging a Ju 88) and attacked a locomotive, which they left smoking and burning along with its train of boxcars.



Ensigns Alfred Wood and Edward Olszewski of VOF-1 pose by the kill markings on the F6F they used to shoot down four German aircraft during the campaign in southern France in August 1944.

Over the following week, the port cities of Marseilles and Toulon were liberated, and the main German forces in the south of France retreated northward. After Dragoon, U.S. Navy carrier forces were no longer needed for the drive to Germany, and many aircraft and ships that had served in Europe eventually were used in combat against the Japanese in the Pacific. In the end, U.S. Naval Aviation contributed its fair share to the victory that would come on VE Day on 8 May 1945.

Cmdr. Mersky has written more than 15 books and 100 magazine articles on military aviation. He received the Admiral Arthur Radford Award in 1999 and the 2003 Contributor of the Year Award from the Tailhook Association. The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of photographs from Alan C. Carey, Eddie Creek, Robert J. Cressman, Maryrose Grossman, Marrisä Joseph, Tony Holmes, Kate Moore, and Barrett Tillman.

Liberators in England

Supporting white fuselages with dark gray tops, the first PB4Y-1s (the Navy's version of the Army's B-24D) arrived in England with VB-103 in August 1943. Eventually, as members of Fleet Air Wing 7, seven squadrons flew Liberators from England until May 1945. They flew 12-hour patrols along the coastline looking for submarines. They eventually sank five U-boats and damaged several more. But there was a costly tradeoff: operational mishaps and combat action accounted for the loss of 200 crewmen.

Perhaps the most well-known of the Navy Liberator pilots was Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., scion of the Massachusetts political family and namesake of its patriarch, the former U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James in London. After gaining his wings in May 1942, Kennedy was assigned to the Navy's PB4Y fleet, eventually serving with VB-110. He and his crew tallied a few U-boat sightings and even engaged German fighters, but there was little to show for all that flight time. Kennedy heard about a secret program called Project Aphrodite and volunteered for it rather than go on the leave for which he had been scheduled.



Aphrodite developed one of the first examples of remotely controlled flying bombs. The weapon was the aircraft itself loaded with bombs, with a skeleton crew of usually one or two pilots who took off and then bailed out when their plane was under the control of an accompanying aircraft. The controller pilot then flew the drone to the target and directed the bomber into the enemy position.

The Army flew the first missions with B-17s, but on 12 August 1944, Kennedy and his copilot, Lt. Wilfred J. Willy, took off from a Royal Air Force airfield on the first Navy Aphrodite mission against the V-3 installation at Mimoyecques in France. The V-3 was a super gun that was built to shell London, 100 miles away. Kennedy and Willy were supposed to bail out over England, but barely 20 minutes after takeoff their aircraft exploded in midair and the two young aviators were killed. Kennedy received the Navy Cross for his dedication and service. The cause of the mishap was never definitively determined.

U.S. Navy PB4Y-1s hunted U-boats around England from air bases such as Dunkswell, home to VB-110. A pilot from that squadron, Joseph Kennedy Jr. (above), would fly his Liberator as part of Project Aphrodite. (Photos from Dunkswell Memorial Museum and John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum)

